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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000116

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, H; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: Staffdel Gilley/McCormick visit: Interlocutors note concerns about cohabitation situation, aid delivery

Refs: Colombo 109, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: A bipartisan delegation of professional staff members from the House International Relations Committee visited Sri Lanka, January 15-18. In addition to a full plate of meetings in Colombo, a highlight of the visit was a day trip to war-torn Jaffna District in the north. Interlocutors in both Colombo and Jaffna underscored deep concerns about Sri Lanka's ongoing cohabitation impasse and its impact on the peace process. Jaffna contacts also expressed concerns about what they characterized as slow delivery of humanitarian assistance to the north. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) A bipartisan delegation of professional staff members from the House International Relations Committee (HIRC) visited Sri Lanka, January 15-18. The delegation comprised:

- Kristen Gilley, Senior Professional Staff Member.
- James McCormick, South Asia Subcommittee staff director.
- Renee Austell, Professional Staff Member and Counsel.
- Hans Hogrefe, Member of the Professional Staff.
- David Killion, Member of the Professional Staff.

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Colombo Meetings
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3. (C) The delegation participated in a series of meetings in Colombo, January 15-16. In the delegation's Colombo meetings, interlocutors underscored deep concerns about Sri Lanka's ongoing cohabitation impasse and its impact on the peace process. Highlights of the delegation's meetings in Colombo included those with Minister G.L. Peiris, Secretary to the Prime Minister Bradman Weerakoon, and Opposition People's Alliance (PA) Spokesman Sarath Amunugama. Key snippets from these three discussions follow:

- G.L. Peiris, Minister of Constitutional Affairs and Enterprise Development and chief GSL spokesman, told the delegation that President Kumaratunga's November 4 takeover of three key ministries (Defense, Interior, Mass Communications) had caused a serious cohabitation rift and had had a "grave negative effect on the peace process." Peiris questioned the constitutionality of the President's actions, and noted that in the GSL's view her actions had been "irresponsible and unlawful." Continuing his aggressive tack toward Kumaratunga, he charged that she "had done nothing for (Sri Lanka's) security needs" since she took over the Defense Ministry. He dismissed her actions as a "clear power grab."

- Bradman Weerakoon, Secretary to the PM, briefed the Staffdel on a wide range of issues. He acknowledged the seriousness of the cohabitation impasse, indicating that he hoped the two sides could overcome their infighting so that they could refocus on the country's pressing concerns. Regarding the peace process, he remarked that informal discussions with the Tamil Tigers were ongoing in the absence of face-to-face negotiations (which have been on hold since April 2003). He said it was crucial that the major political parties in the south work together, as, in his opinion, a constitutional amendment would be needed to implement any negotiated settlement reached with the Tigers. This amendment would require two-thirds support in Parliament, which was only attainable if the major parties cooperated with each other. While he did not have a strong opinion regarding the recent alliance reached by the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), he did not think that general elections would take place in the near-term, as some feared. When asked about the recent string of church attacks in Sri Lanka, Weerakoon said it was "a new phenomenon," which

the government was very concerned about. On a related front, Weerakoon said he did not think that proposed "anti-conversion" legislation would ultimately be passed by Parliament.

-- Sarath Amunugama, senior PA MP, indicated that he did not foresee any near-term resolution to the cohabitation impasse. He dismissed the idea that the President would respond to the PM's calls for her to take control of the peace process and ceasefire agreement with the Tigers in light of her takeover of the Defense Ministry. He characterized the SLFP/JVP alliance as an electoral pact, uniting the two parties against the ruling United National Party. Despite the JVP's traditional opposition to devolution of power as a proposed means of resolving Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, he insisted that the SLFP would remain open to the concept of devolution. In negotiating with the Tigers, he felt that a bipartisan approach must be taken by the south, regardless of which party was in power.

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Visit to Jaffna
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14. (C) A highlight of the delegation's visit was a day trip to the northern city of Jaffna on January 17. Poloff and Pol FSN accompanied the delegation on the trip. In contrast to a December visit by Mission and SA/INS personnel (see Reftels), there were far fewer soldiers patrolling the streets, which bustled with activity. The visit kicked off with a briefing by the military commander of Jaffna, Major General Susil Chandrapala. General Chandrapala, who has just assumed his post, outlined the GSL's security concerns in the Jaffna Peninsula. He asserted that the military's "high security zones" served a strategic purpose in protecting GSL operations in Jaffna, as well as providing security to Tamil civilians living in the area. Chandrapala underlined the need for additional financial assistance for the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs), as the Jaffna peninsula had the highest number of IDPs in Sri Lanka.

15. (C) Other contacts in Jaffna also asserted that the delivery of aid to the north was very slow. For example, Additional Government Agent (AGA) for Jaffna M. Paul claimed that GSL money for resettlement assistance fell far short of the needs of IDPs. Jaffna University professor N. Sitralapam charged that the government had done "virtually nothing for rehabilitation" in the north. Also of deep concern to interlocutors was the cohabitation dispute between the President and Prime Minister, which was characterized by M. Paul as "petty, minor differences between two leaders dragging down the peace process."

16. (SBU) During the Jaffna visit, the delegation also visited a demining site, where USG-trained and equipped humanitarian deminers from the Sri Lanka Army demonstrated mine clearance techniques in an area slated for eventual resettlement by IDPs. In addition, the team visited a USAID-funded center that provides prostheses and wheelchairs to disabled persons in the Jaffna District. (Jaffna has a high instance of injury due to landmines and unexploded ordnance.)

17. (U) The Staffdel did not have an opportunity to clear this message before it left Sri Lanka.

18. (U) Minimize considered.
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